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U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Thursday, August 26, 1937.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "STORING POTATOES." Information from the Bureaus of Plant Industry, Agricultural Engineering, and Home Economics, United States Department of Agriculture, and various agricultural experiment stations.

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Potato-digging in home gardens begins early in September in northern sections, and continues till frost nips the vines. Even in August a few small new potatoes have doubtless graced the northern family table. Vermonters cook them whole, scraped or in their jackets, then peeled, and pour a white sauce over them as they come to the table. My own preference is to serve those tender, waxy, boiled new potatoes with melted butter and chopped parsley.

Obviously, the longer the tubers stay in the ground, the bigger they grow. So it's thrifty to leave them where they are until the first superficial frost warns you that the potatoes must be harvested before the frost goes down into the ground.

Right now I'm not going into the 50 or more delicious ways of preparing potatoes. Nor shall I discuss the fact that potatoes are no more fattening than unsweetened grape juice, and baked beans, and sweet cherries -- all of which are in the 18% carbohydrate class. They're rich in minerals, too, and supply vitamins A, B, C, and G.

Today I offer some pointers on storing the home-grown potato crop for winter use.

The color of potato chips recently stimulated a series of investigations by scientists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and several of the agricultural experiment stations in the great commercial late potato-producing areas. Maine, New York, Idaho, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania are all important states for market potatoes.

The manufacturers of potato chips are large buyers of "spuds". So are restaurant managers, and they fry many bushels in deep fat as their customers demand French fried potatoes with almost every meat or fish order. Baked potatoes, too, are very popular. The chip manufacturers and restaurant men found that the flavor and texture of the cooked potatoes were continually varying, and they didn't know why. At some seasons of the year, especially early in the season, the flavor was fine, the color and texture exactly right. Later on, chips and French fries browned too dark. Baked potatoes were sometimes mealier and better than at other times.

The scientists to whom they took their troubles found that the difficulty was the storage temperature. So they recommend that you store at an even temperature of 60 degrees when potatoes are to be consumed before the end of the dormant season, - that is, by about the first of January, or a little later.

But if kept at this temperature too long potatoes will sprout.

Potatoes that are to be held over until late in the winter or used in the spring before the new crop comes along must be handled differently. The best way seems to be to hold them at about 40 degrees to retard sprouting. The food value is not impaired by the lower temperature. But the potatoes will have a sweetish taste, due to the sugar they have developed in storage. They must be reconditioned by storing them at room temperature for a week or two before use. Then the undesirable sweetish taste will disappear. Room temperature is 65 or 70 degrees.

In the experiments that led to these conclusions the plant scientists raised 4 well-known varieties of potatoes on the U. S. Department of Agriculture's experimental farm at Arlington, Va. They stored several different lots of these potatoes for 124 days, or four months. Some were held at 60 degrees, some at 50, others at 40, and two lots were kept at 36 and 32 degrees. At the end of the storage period the home economists used the potatoes in making chips, French fries, and in other ways.

There were slight differences in the behavior of each of the four varieties tested. The kinds were Irish Cobbler, Green Mountain, Katahdin, and Russet Burbank. But results were averaged, and showed definitely that if you store potatoes at 60 degrees for four months, they are unchanged when taken out of storage. When the storage temperature is dropped to 50 degrees, the potatoes are nearly the same as they were originally. There is a very slight increase in the sugar content. Potato chips and French fries made with potatoes stored at 50 degrees were palatable, but a little darker than those made from the potatoes stored at 60 degrees. Some of them could not be offered for sale because people want a light-colored chip.

Those stored at 40 degrees had begun to develop sugar and had a slightly sweetish taste when cooked. They could not be used at all for potato chips. The two lots stored at 36 and 32 degrees developed so much sugar that you could taste it in a slice of raw potato.

Potatoes can be kept in the home cellar if the right (constant) temperature and humidity can be maintained. A cellar with a dirt floor is better for potato storage than one with a cement floor. The storage room should be separated from the furnace room by an insulated partition. A thermometer for frequent readings is practically a necessity in storing potatoes.

The storage room should be dark. Potatoes start sprouting if you store them in a light place. There should be a window that can be opened on mild days or nights for ventilation, when the outside temperature is above freezing. Where winter temperatures go very low, the potatoes in the storage room can be put loose into slat bins on legs. Any dirt falls through, and there is good air circulation. In warmer sections the potatoes will do better in baskets or crates on (slat) shelves, but if they are stored in bins they should be piled only about a foot or two deep or they will not keep so well (overheat). In the north where the winters are colder they can be piled much deeper in the bin, but they should not be piled against an outside wall. If the weather gets dangerously cold it's a good idea to open the door into the heated part of the cellar until the temperature of the storage room is safe.

I'll stop today with an interesting fact which is new to me, and maybe to some of you: Apples- or any other fruit- should not be stored near potatoes. The fruit will suffer. Apples in particular will take on a disagreeable, earthy potato flavor. So put the apples somewhere else!

